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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: WHAT COMES AFTER THE P-TOMS?

REF: COLOMBO 01128

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) President Chandrika Kumaratunga's decision to sign the controversial Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS), also known as the "joint mechanism," has clearly surprised her political allies and enemies alike, leaving many of them scrambling to strategize next moves. In the short term, alliance partners New Unity Alliance (NUA), Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) have cast their lot with the President. In the longer term, most parties anticipate some kind of election--whether provincial council, parliamentary or presidential--within the next six months or so, and are beginning to campaign accordingly. Foreign Minister Kadirgamar, however, told the Ambassador on June 30 that the President has "strong legal backing" to defer presidential elections until November 2006. Both the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP) are planning "mass movements" to canvas public support, while the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) is continuing to hold strikes in the east against the joint mechanism. Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) Deputy Minister of Ports Dilan Perera, a close ally of the President, sees the best possibility as a deal--hypothetically brokered by members of the international community--between the two major parties. End summary.

POST P-TOMS SIGNING:
SCRAMBLING AND STRATEGIZING

12. (C) Since the Government's June 24 signing of the controversial Post-Tsunami Management Structure (P-TOMS) agreement, also known as the "joint mechanism," to coordinate tsunami relief with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

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(LTTE), President Chandrika Kumaratunga's friends and foes alike have been weighing the political fall-out, scrambling to re-position themselves advantageously following the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's (JVP) June 16 defection from the government coalition. Most interlocutors (on both sides of the aisle) expect some kind of election--whether provincial council, parliamentary or presidential--within the next six months or so. Although no one has officially acknowledged beginning campaigning, various "mass movements" planned by individual parties seem to be thinly disguised efforts to rally public support and test popular sentiments.

13. (SBU) Among such movements have been back-to-back "hartals," or general strikes, called by the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) to protest the P-TOMS (reftel). In addition to the June 27 hartal in Ampara, a general strike was observed in the Muslim area of Muttur in Trincomalee district on June 29. SLMC leader Rauff Hakeem has also continued his harsh public pronouncements against the agreement, charging that it shortchanges the Muslim community. Former government alliance partner JVP held an anti-mechanism rally in front of City Hall in Colombo on June 29. JVP Propaganda Secretary and MP Wimal Weerawansa had predicted a turnout of 20,000 at the protest; observers put attendance at less than half that number. The United National Party (UNP), meanwhile, is organizing a "People's Power Movement," which the party is touting as a "million-man march" from the southern district of Matara to Colombo July 2-12. According to UNP Matara MP Lakshman Yapa, the march will begin with 15,000 participants in his district, gradually adding steam (and, the party hopes, marchers) along the coastal road, culminating in Colombo July 12 with a massive rally of one million participants. (Comment: Although Yapa identified the theme as a protest against the cost of living, the aim is clearly something else--a pre-election test of the temperature of UNP support. End comment.) In separate meetings, Yapa and fellow UNP MP M.H. Mohamed each told poloffs that they expect the President to dissolve Parliament and call for general elections circa October/November--about the time she will need a (now non-existent) majority to pass the budget.

14. (C) In a June 29 meeting, JVP MP (and former Minister of Culture) Vijitha Herath and JVP MP Piyasiri Wijenayake told POL FSN their party will continue to oppose the P-TOMS, which they depicted as a worse "sell-out" of national interests than the UNP-negotiated Ceasefire Agreement. They vowed to continue court challenges to the legality of the agreement. (Note: In addition to the case cited reftel, the JVP-aligned National Bhikku (Monk) Front and the Patriotic National Movement each filed petitions against the P-TOMS in Colombo District Court on June 28.) Both MPs speculated that President Kumaratunga, having lost the support of the JVP at the local level as well, will call for provincial council elections before August. (Note: Since the JVP walk-out, the opposition UNP now controls all seven provincial councils.) By doing so, her former allies suggested, the President can check the "pulse of the people" subsequent to signing the P-TOMS.

15. (SBU) On June 28 government alliance partners New Unity Alliance (NUA) and the Sinhalese nationalist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), which had considered leaving over the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) (Reftel), announced separate decisions to remain in the coalition. Despite these decisions, however, both parties made plain their discomfort with the joint mechanism agreement. In a press statement following its deliberations, the MEP Central Committee announced that the party "cannot agree with the (P-TOMS) document . . . because it is against the basic principles of our party." The statement went on to cite "hand(ing) over the people of the Eastern province to the control of Wannu LTTE"; giving LTTE "control of large areas which are under Government control"; and "the high security risk" posed by giving LTTE control of the 2km stretch along the coastal belt in the north and east as reasons for its opposition.

16. (C) NUA MP and Deputy Minister of Ports and Aviation Cegu Issadeen told poloff on June 29 that while his party sees the necessity for a joint mechanism with the LTTE in principle, it "cannot face" its Muslim constituents in the east and tell them that the P-TOMS is in their best interest. The P-TOMS deck is stacked against the Muslims, he said, particularly at the regional level, at the LTTE's behest. He believes that the President tried her best to convince the LTTE to allow a Muslim representative to sign the agreement and to reconfigure Muslim representation at the regional level, but the LTTE would not allow it. "We don't want to be a hurdle to the joint mechanism," but at the same time cannot ask "our people" in good faith to support it, Issadeen said. He fears that most Eastern Muslims will be sympathetic to SLMC protests against the mechanism. While NUA will not campaign against the mechanism as the SLMC is doing, Issadeen said, "we will ask people not to participate in it" either, since it does not accord the Muslim community any power or advantage. He concluded by asking the U.S. to use its "good offices" to persuade the LTTE to allow the Muslims an equitable role in the committees.

17. (SBU) In a June 30 meeting, Hindu Affairs Minister and anti-LTTE Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) Leader Douglas Devananda reconfirmed to poloffs his party's statement endorsing the joint mechanism, although he criticized the P-TOMS as "not specific enough" about the authority given various committees. Asserting that the LTTE had never expected the President to sign the agreement, Devananda speculated that the Tigers would now seek to obstruct its smooth operation.

HOW THE SLFP SEES IT

18. (C) In a June 30 meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said he does not expect the President to call snap general elections. Not even the JVP wants parliamentary elections at this time, the Foreign Minister said, adding that the President will not dissolve Parliament unless the budget (which comes up for a vote in November) fails to pass twice. He emphasized that he does not believe the JVP would try to engineer an early downfall of the government to trigger general elections. With respect to Presidential elections, Kadirgamar asserted that the President has "strong legal backing" to remain as President until November 2006. If the Election Commissioner calls for elections earlier than that, Kadirgamar said, Kumaratunga will ask the Supreme Court for an advisory opinion on the matter.

19. (C) The JVP will continue to play games to stir up nationalist sentiment against the P-TOMS, Kadirgamar predicted, using "the reaction in the street" to gauge public sentiment. In an apparent reference to UNP MP Peiris' criticism of the P-TOMS as inadequately representing the Sinhalese (Reftel), Kadirgamar accused the UNP of also "trying to play the nationalist card." He conceded, however, that there was "general disgust" at the Norwegians and Nordic-sponsored Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) for

failing to enforce the ceasefire or to call the LTTE on its frequent and severe violations of the accord. Kadirgamar cited Norwegian/SLMM inaction after reports of an LTTE airstrip as the most egregious example.

110. (C) SLFP MP and Deputy Minister of Ports Dilan Perera told poloff in a June 30 conversation that he views a compromise with the UNP as the best possible scenario. Losing the ever-fractious JVP as a coalition partner is a "bit of a relief," he confided, adding optimistically that many JVP-opposed initiatives, e.g., the restructuring of the state-owned electrical utility, could now proceed. He dismissed the suggestion that the President would be forced to call for provincial council elections--the UNP and JVP cannot work together well enough to force such a decision--and said that he does not anticipate a fight over the budget--and thus early parliamentary elections--as long as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which commands 22 seats, votes with the government.

111. (C) The joint mechanism, ideally, should open up the possibility of unprecedented amity between the two largest parties, Perera said, although recent comments by UNP Spokesman G.L. Peiris (Reftel) seem to undercut that hope. Both party leaders have made bold decisions to advance the peace process; that common aim ought to bring them together, he continued. He suggested that, in exchange for a guarantee of UNP support not to try to topple the government and an "agreement on a common program on the ethnic issue," the President could perhaps be persuaded to move the anticipated date for presidential elections somewhere between the UNP's demand (November 2005) her own, more expanded timeframe (November 2006). The President and UNP Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe do not necessarily trust each other, he conceded, but they can at least talk to each other and work with each other. When asked how the two (mutually distrustful) leaders could be persuaded to come together, Perera responded, "They must be told to do so"--preferably by the international community.

COMMENT

112. (C) Almost one week after the P-TOMS was signed, most parties still seem to be weighing the repercussions of the altered political landscape and attempting to reposition themselves accordingly. Elections of some sort appear to be a common assumption; questions like when, what kind, and with which possible new alliance partners are still up in the air. Most important, it remains unclear exactly where popular sentiment regarding the P-TOMS lies; the scramble among various parties to hold rallies and protests is an obvious effort to try to shape still-amorphous public opinion. We have heard frequent discussion of the need for the SLFP and UNP to work together in the national interest (including from members of both parties) in the past, but we remain skeptical that the leaders of either party will determine it is in their personal and political interest to do so.
LUNSTEAD